**Nile Basin Development Challenge**

**Template for the most significant change story 2012**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Project | NBDC N5 |
| Title | Online peer assists to keep communication and integration front and centre |
| Author(s) | Ewen Le Borgne |
| Domain | Communication |
| Story | In early 2012, in discussion with Michael Victor and Peter Ballantyne we decided to launch online peer-assists to bring all CPWF communication people in touch with each other and to provide much needed and appreciated peer support, as we all agreed among communication specialists that we were struggling around similar issues and would benefit from working together on these, as well as to better understand activities in the CPWF as a whole. This turned out to be a great mechanism for CPWF but also for the NBDC to (continue to) put due emphasis on communication.  Before the online peer assists, there was rather little ongoing exchange among communicators in the Challenge Programme for Water and Food, except communications between Peter Ballantyne and Michael Victor and odd face-to-face events involving a wider group of communicators, such as the International Forums for Water and Food, and occasional Yammer messages preceding or directly following face-to-face contact. During the third of these forums, communicators from all basins were again very happy to see and work with each other. But the risk of losing that energy of being together was looming again.  In order to keep the momentum, we agreed to start a series of online peer assists around the broad topic of ‘How to develop more engaging communication processes leading to more engaging scientific research results?’. These meetings would last 1.5 hours and would be facilitated by Ewen Le Borgne (as part of a support contract provided to the CPWF secretariat by ILRI knowledge management and information services).  Peer assists are a facilitation mechanism that require one person to present a concrete case of problem they are facing. All other participants first listen carefully, then ask for clarification questions and then provide, one by one, their suggestions for dealing with the problem at hand. At the end, the peer assistee explains what recommendations s/he will apply. Later on, s/he shares feedback with the group about the results garnered. In the CPWF we used an online version of this method, using Skype to chat verbally and [MeetingWords](http://meetingwords.com/) to document the conversation as it happens, live.  Six peer assists have been held since the beginning of the 2012, showcasing concrete problems from various basins:   * Nile Basin Innovation Platforms: Why IP’s and how can we link the local with the national? * Engaging Ganges scientists in the communication work * Yammer, a conversation space for 4-5 people only? (Andes case) * Documenting processes, why bother? (*Another Nile case*) * CPWF global website * How to convey and communicate research through participatory video? (Volta case)   The peer assists have been much appreciated by all participants for the practical tips provided, useful conceptual references brought in and for the ongoing networking which has cemented strong relationships among communication specialists across the CPWF. The case of ‘documenting processes’ for instance put much emphasis on this area of work between communication and M&E, helped unearth useful resources and provide simple entry points to doing it in all basins. In the case of the CPWF global website, the secretariat team found lots of useful advice to collect stories from the basins without having to duplicate work or steal ownership/traffic from the individual basin channels.  Peer assists have progressively involved more people, not directly related to CPWF work – as they heard about it on the Yammer network ‘Comms for uptake’ where the peer assists were promoted, announced and documented. Occasionally these peer assists brought together scientists such as Beth Cullen for the Innovation Platforms case or Karen Greenough about documenting processes. These peer assists have also paved the way for a series of (online) learning and documentation meetings which started in August (including basin leaders and scientists from various basins). In the recent workshop on communication and knowledge management for CRPs, online peer assists were again discussed as one of the mechanisms that could be used to enhance relations between science and communication and connections across CRPs.  **What is remarkable or interesting about these online peer assists?**  On top of the benefits for associated communication specialists, these peer assists have been a great way to connect communication and research more strongly, in relation with both research outputs and work processes. In the case of the IP discussion, the peer assist has been the basis of an idea to document IPs more widely across the CPWF, to support Beth and the NBDC team in this from a program perspective.  For the NBDC, these peer assists have been a great way to showcase some of the work that is going on in the Basin and to strengthen the approach to communication, incorporating feedback from other CPWF members and extending the reach of NBDC work through global CPWF outlets (newsletter, website etc.).  The regular attention to communication that these peer assists stimulated also helped communication keep on playing a relatively strong role in NBDC, leading to a couple of NBDC meetings about it and the development of a 5-pager laying out communication priorities for the end of the program, which is one of the sources for NBDC’s learning and documentation plans.  **What constraints remain**  The biggest challenge is to ensure the presence of scientists in these peer assists, as they are time-starved and do not necessarily prioritize this type of work.  The cases also need to be as practical and clear as possible to generate useful results, otherwise they end up being very vague discussions.  Some cases presented are complex and take time to take shape so it is unclear how each basin team has really taken advantage of the peer assists to inform planning and activities.  Technically, the internet connection is not always reliable although the MeetingWords pad has been a great help in ensuring everyone can follow the conversation even if they drop out.   Supporting documentation  <http://infoilri.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/online-peer-assists-learning-about-concrete-solutions-and-better-questions-for-water-and-land-management-researchers/> |
| Lessons | **List the lessons here**  1. Concrete problems discussed regularly among a group are a great way to generate solutions and develop social capital among group members  2. Attention to communication increases with regular participation and leads to stronger integration across all basins  3. It remains difficult to engage scientists in what might not seem a directly useful / productive activity  4. The mechanism of peer assist has great potential for complex programs that need strong communication, cooperation and/or coordination  5. Having a support contract ensured these meetings could be facilitated and documented properly |
| **Describe the issues that have facilitated the success aspects of this story?**  Initial face-to-face contact and trust building among the starting group. Online facilitation experience to run the events. Good choice of technologies to not rely too heavily on Skype). Dissemination in appropriate channels to stimulate interest from others. |
| **What has exacerbated the aspects of this story that have not gone well?**  Technology issues, lack of experience in presenting concrete problems, lack of seniority of comms people to attract scientific audiences. |
| Process | **Why and how was this story selected?** |